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ABSTRACT

It appears that there is no clear answer to the question of what people are looking for in their professional literature in reading, since professionals, including publishers, writers, and educators, are individuals with differing needs and opinions. However, settling on an answer may not be important to excellence in education; perhaps only the quest is important. (LL)

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HOLY GRAILS AND MONOGRAPHS

Someone once asked me to list the five books which most influenced me as an educator. Not at all tongue-in-cheek, I listed Chicken Little first, then Wynken, Blynken and Nod and the Holy Bible. From that point it remains a toss-up among a whole bunch of books: A. S. Neill's Summerhill, The Return of the Native, More's Utopia, A Tale of Two Cities, 1984, Brave New World, The Little World of Don Camillo, Huck Finn, and so on. These latter ones, in fact, probably did not influence me so much as they simply verbalized beliefs, attitudes and ideas that I had already arrived at on my own. But, Chicken Little? Pow! That story hit me like the piece of sky that fell on Chicken Little's head. It introduced me to the finiteness of life and physical reality, to the expendability of individual lives within the cosmos, to the unwarranted self-assurance of the adult world, to the imponderable endlessness of the universe that bounds this sky of ours. Did those things, in turn, influence my later career as a teacher? Yes, indeed! Like nothing else!

Perhaps it follows, then, that if I consider Chicken Little to be the most influential book in my life as an educator, I should not consider myself an educator. Some critics will certainly notice that neither B. F. Skinner nor Robert Mager, or, since this is a conference of reading instructors, neither William S. Gray nor William H. McGuffey is represented

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among my top five--or six or seven or what-you-will. How could I possibly call myself an educator when I have failed to include so much of what is considered basic or current to my special field of inquiry?

Many of us will assume that this personal anecdote tells us more about me than it tells us about our topic here today--the tools that people want in education, especially in that educational specialty known as reading. I am not so sure, though, that the assumption is a safe one.

I read recently that there are 435,000 books in print at the present time in the United States alone. The reference went on to note an estimate that more than 50 million books have gone out of print since books were first invented. Before every one of those 50 million volumes was created, somebody--perhaps no one other than the lonely author himself--believed that here was a book for which there was a definite need. Here was a tool, an answer, an aid that someone else somewhere would want. When I consider the number of manuscripts that never were accepted for publication, that never got turned into one or another of those 50 million books, or even the 435,000 still in print in this nation, I wonder how anyone could possibly ask for more. Some years ago, for instance, I heard that one major publishing firm had rejected 4,000 manuscripts for every one it had published in a given year. Talk about exponential factors! What is it you could possibly want that is not already available?

Of course, if one follows such facts and logic far enough and turns eventually to the question of the specific motivation for publishing a book or article in the first place, one can easily conclude that no one wants a book produced in order to read it; rather, that there are only

people who want to write books and, coincidentally, enough buyers with sufficient money to enable the publisher, at least, to stay afloat financially. If readers really knew what they wanted in a book, we would simply need to give them keyboard access to a data bank--the half million words in our language--and a handsome three-ring binder next to the checkout counter, then turn them loose, every soul producing a single copy of the one book that will satisfy that soul. There would be no readers, only writers and, maybe, buyers, with the buyers simply a sideline, a coincidence, a byproduct of publishing as an activity.

As potential buyers of books, we have been caught up in a couple of myths. One is the myth of the exponential growth of knowledge--that it doubled between one A.D. and 1500, again between 1500 and 1750, again by 1875, and so forth, and that now it is doubling every few years to the point that specialists cannot keep up with new knowledge even in their own specialties since there are not enough hours in the day to read all that is being produced. (Quick! Quick! Find Evelyn Wood!) Take your pick of the people who have stated such a belief.

In reviewing much of what does and does not get published in one educational specialty, I personally suspect that we are not at all faced with exponential growth of knowledge in our civilization. Growth, yes. Exponential in some few, narrowly defined specialties, probably. But generally exponential--no.

Exponential growth of total printed output is another matter. I have few doubts that the number of woodland acres transformed into bound pages of print is increasing exponentially. More and more pages seem to

be printed each year, but how much of the outpouring adds to what has already been known and said? We are almost as a culture and as a profession in the position not of climbing mountains simply because they are there, but of churning out books because the pulpwood is plentiful and the presses are close at hand. Where presses fail--or turn us down--we turn to Ditto, A. B. Dick, Xerox or IBM. But, publish we will!

The second myth that particularly victimizes those of us in professional education is the myth that we know what we are doing. If we don't know what we are doing, the myth turns on us and tells us that we damned well better know what we are doing for we will be held accountable!

Like any other matters of faith, these two myths shape our lives, especially our professional lives. They make us zealous crusaders, seeking that which we do not know so that we will be able to do better what we are not sure we are doing at all. The quest after the Holy Grail was never more fervent--nor pointless.

All of this must sound quite heretical, coming as it does from one who has within the past year been named to a central position of responsibility in the publishing division of a major professional association dedicated to the promotion of literacy and the improvement of reading instruction everywhere. However, I arrive at similar conclusions, even when I take an altogether different approach to the problem implicit in our topic: What are professionals asking for? What do they want to see in print?

At one level, graduate seminars and study centers, they want research reports, lab reports. They want to know what is going on. Is somebody discovering something that I don't know about? On another level, in classrooms from kindergarten through community college, they want to know what works--the green pages from Early Years, How to Use Transactional Analysis in the Reading Lab (footnote Dave Capuzzi)--classroom diaries and pedagogical cookbooks, the former for human uplift and release, the latter strictly for business. The all-time bestseller from the International Reading Association's booklist is Kress and Johnson's little volume on Informal Reading Inventories.

I wish everyone luck in finding what they seek. In my position I will certainly help them try to find it, I will try to place the Holy Grail in some easily accessible place--a different Holy Grail for every seeker, to whatever extent available resources allow. But, that attempt at wish fulfillment, my official role of trying to fulfill others' wishes, returns me sooner or later, usually near the end of a day near the end of a week near the end of an attempt, to Chicken Little and the really big questions in life and in education.

We have met the enemy and he is us, said Pogo in the most widely quoted statement of the century. The kingdom of God is within, said Christ in what is for me an earlier version of Pogo's little observation. They both have said the same thing, as far as I can tell. Seek ye first the kingdom, know thyself, however you choose to phrase it. If that kind of response from me to the question of the day sounds like a copout, you will have to forgive me. It is the most truthful response I can offer

when I am asked what people are looking for in their professional literature in reading. I am not really sure what it is that people are looking for in the professional literature. I don't have an answer, and I really don't believe anyone does. Perhaps there are no answers, only the question and the quest. Perhaps settling on an answer is not important or necessary to excellence in education; perhaps only the quest is important.

The quest can have its valuable spin-offs, its bestsellers and gems within the profession, even as Lancelot found his Guinevere. The blessed few among us win fame or find secret magic in this or that spin-off. Some become the saints and apostles of our profession. But, most of us poor sinners, we keep questing after truth, buying books, or writing them, and scanning catalogs. Maybe the search is our reward. After all, Lancelot discovered that Guivevere really belonged to someone else.

Let's get on with the questions.